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ABSTRACT

Miami-Dade Community College began in 1960 and now has 5 campuses and about 20 outreach centers. For the 1993-94 school year (the latest on which there are complete figures), 76,787 students were enrolled at Miami-Dade; another 43,391 took non-credit courses. Over the past 25 years, as the community has changed, obviously the college has reflected that change in the student body; Spanish is now designated as the native language of more than 40% of the students. Despite intense efforts, one English professor sees no improvement in the writing ability of students coming to the college. Further, there are so many students enrolling in the college that the expense of keeping up with hardware and space requirements is almost impossible on a scale that would keep large number of students up-to-date with developments in electronic media that could enhance English and composition courses. Finally, the state has imposed a major pressure on curriculum at all institutions that receive state funding. All AA degree-seeking students must pass the College Level Academic Skills Test--an assessment test for college juniors in order to get the degree and students at four-year colleges must pass it in order to attain junior standing. Thirty years ago there was money for two-year schools, especially the large ones, to support innovation, to encourage teacher experimentation, to send teachers to conventions, and to try programs and activities that might engage and teach students. Today, these academic concerns are not always the concerns of administrations; decisions seem increasingly to be money driven rather than pedagogically driven. (TB)

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Adapting Two-Year College English To the New Literacies and New Technologies

"The Large Urban Community College Meets the Challenges of New Literacies and New Technologies"

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Audrey J. Roth

A few years ago, the English editor of a major publishing company walked with me from my office to my classroom so we could finish a conversation.

"And what," he asked, "are you doing about diversity?"

Astonished by such a question—and this was before I realized that "diversity" was to be one of the latest buzz words—I pointed to the students rushing along the hallways and could only answer with a question of my own.

"What do you call this?"

I realized later that I was being naive. Probably only because I teach at a college in Miami does my school have the particular student body it does. While friends at a community college on the other coast of Florida are running workshops on diversity for their faculty members—introducing them to, mainly, Hispanic culture, art, customs, and literature—some of my departmental colleagues are *giving* such workshops. Not only in Florida, but also in South Carolina, Virginia, and other states.

Miami-Dade Community College began in 1960 and now has 5 campuses and about 20 outreach centers—though many of the latter are in

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danger of being being closed because of a directive from the state that all community colleges plan on a 25% budget reduction. (A financial situation in which I know we are not alone.)

For the 1993-94 school year (the latest on which there are complete figures), 76,787 credit students were enrolled at Miami-Dade; another 43,391 took non-credit courses. (A total of 120, 178) On the campus where I teach, largest in the school and enrolling more than 20,000 credit students, 66.7% are U.S. citizens; the remainder, including permanent resident aliens, come from 102 countries.

57.4% of our credit students are Hispanic, almost all coming from Central and South America, but not, generally, from Mexico. For a number of years, Miam-Dade has enrolled more African-American and Hispanic students than any other college or university in the United States. For many years we also enrolled more visa students than any other college or university. Right now, 47% of all community college minority students in Florida attend Miami-Dade.

Over the past 25 years, as the community has changed, obviously the College has reflected that change in the student body. English, which used to be cited as the native language of 70% of our students is down by 25%. Spanish is now designated as the native language of more than 40% of our students, and that doesn't acknowledge the increasing number of students born in this country but who speak Spanish (or another language) at home. Among those other languages, French/Creole is designated as their native language by 5.05% of our current students.

(You might also be interested to know that the form which the College uses for students to evaluate faculty members is printed in English, Spanish, French, and *Russian.*)

Diversity? You bet.

It's also the kind of diversity that means our students bring not only different language skills but also differing frameworks of references and experiences—differences that are evident in their responses to both reading and writing assignments.

I can't offer any statistics on this, but teachers in all disciplines—especially my colleagues—believe that students are less prepared for college work than they were even 20, let alone 30, years ago. They tend to be less "educated" (in the formal sense of the word), they read less, they are less aware of experiences—even though many of them are well traveled to other countries and, indeed, come from differing cultures.

In terms of English preparation, despite a much touted Writing Enhancement Program in the state of Florida which supplied matching local funds to reduce class size and teacher workload in junior and/or senior high school English courses, and thus bring more writing into those classes, and despite Dade county English supervisors working very hard with public school teachers on all levels, I don't think we've seen any improvement in the writing ability of students coming to our college. And, alas, budget cuts abolished that program almost three years ago.

One response to the changing student body and the English language skills of students entering the College has been the exapansion of both credit and non-credit courses. On my own campus, the ESL department teaches seven levels of speaking and writing; it generally enrolls about 5,000 students <u>each term</u>, not all of them counted in with credit figures because the students are in the English Language Institute. Furthermore, the college has had to expanded its <u>pre-freshman</u> level offerings to two courses in reading and three courses in writing. Consistently over the past 15 or so years, about

2/3 of all entering students at my College have had to take one or more such developmental (including math) courses—euphemistically titled "College Prep" courses in Florida. On my campus, there is a writing lab for that level plus a Writing Center to serve students in the college credit level courses.

For the first few years I taught at Miami-Dade, there were four required courses for graduation: one in language and logic, and one each to coordinate with requirements in social science, natural science, and humanities. Within a few years that was changed to one composition and one survey of literature class as requirements. Over one winter vacation, that was changed to two composition courses to be consistent with the state universities. When our administration discovered how poorly our students were doing on the state-required CLAST exam, the requirement changed over one weekend to the present three required composition classes for AA degree-seeking students. (And we're on a trimester system.)

If Miami-Dade differs from other urban community colleges in student ethnic and language groups, I believe we share with other colleges a student population which has shown a steady rise in age. To say that the median age of our students is 23 years doesn't really tell the story. A truer measure of an increase in the ages of students enrolled is that now 45% of our students are between 21 and 30 years of age. This has been the largest shift for, as younger students left the school or moved into the 21 to 30 year old group, more students in that age range have enrolled.

Also in common with other large urban community colleges are the facts that almost all students are local residents and about 2/3 of them carry less than 15 hours a term. I would also guess that at least 90% of our students hold paying jobs, the greater proportion of them at least 40 hours a

week. The younger among these working students seem less committed to education than to rushing off to their "real life," their jobs and their social life. The more serious students have often been away from formal schooling for a while and find they have to back up and acquire, rather than just brush up on, language skills they'd not paid attention to years before. Time and again I've reminded students of what I know they were taught in English and other high school classes so they can begin to deal with the work we're about. I used maps in the room so often with one class that when one student asked if I were teaching the 1102 class next term and I said, "No," his response was, "Well, are you maybe going to teach a geography course?"

I started teaching writing in a computer-equipped classroom about twelve or fourteen years ago, but soon stopped because of limited student accessibility. We simply have so *many* students that the expense of keeping up with hardware and space requirements is almost impossible on a scale that would enable large percentages of our students (about 3000 are enrolled in my department's courses each term) to keep up with developments in electronic media that could enhance English and composition courses. Several large-scale projects have received outside funding and developed within my college, but they they seem to serve relatively few of our students. Recently I met a university professor who has experimented with using E-mail to keep in touch with students in his one writing class. But with a normal course load of five writing classes and a beginning enrollment of 28 in each of them, I'd hate to get involved with any E-mail dialogue, for instance. Thus, I believe I'm safe in saying that new technologies have had a diminishing, rather an an increasing, influence on our writing courses.

Besides, because of constant budget squeezes, changing technology has left behind many of those who could benefit from it

If technology hasn't had major impact on what and how we teach, we do have, in Florida, one major pressure on curriculum and that is what amounts to a rising junior test imposed on all Florida post-secondary students at institutions that receive state funding—which, for all practical purposes, means private as well as public colleges and universities. Many of you teach in states where a similar kind of test in math, reading, writing, and grammar and usage exists. In Florida it's called the CLAST—College Level Academic Skills Test. All AA degree-seeking students must pass it in order to get the degree and students at four-year colleges must pass it in order to attain junior standing. That's why my college now has the three required composition courses: an attempt to increase the passing rate of our students. From what I infer around the state, that test is driving the curriculum at all too many schools. It's a "pass the CLAST mentality." Like the Writing Enhancement Program on the secondary school level, the College Level Academic Skills Program, of which the test is a part, was meant to improve literacy in Florida. From my own perspective, I don't think either of these great legislative dictates has done so.

Rather, I think (and I'm not alone in my department in this belief) that the English curriculum has been watered down over the past 25 years and standards have been lowered to enable more people to pass the English courses. On the other hand, the more students we <u>don't</u> pass the more we may inhibit people from progressing—which few teachers are satisfied to do. And, of course, we will also look bad to the community and certainly to the state legislature.

Thirty years ago, there was money in the two-year schools, especially the large ones, to support innovation, to encourage teachers to experiment, to send teachers to conventions such as this one, to try programs and activities that might engage and teach our students. And there were new theories coming to the forefront in that time—ideas we could catch on to and adapt and make use of. The funding base of many large urban community colleges made much of that possible.

On the other hand, today these academic concerns are not always the concerns of administrations. Decisions seem increasingly to be money-driven rather than pedagogically driven. Within the generally aging and overworked, even stressed-out faculty, there's ennui [*an'we'*] where there used to be innovation.

Quickly, then, what are the changes I believe we in large urban two-year colleges have had to respond to? Mostly, they have been student pressures brought on by their abilities, the mix of individuals, and their attitudes. Like other schools everywhere, we've be subjected to the agendas of outside agencies, especially the state. And of course administrations often have their own agendas, sometimes different from that of the faculty. I know what Thomas Wolfe said about not going home again. But there are sure times when I wish I could turn back the clock to a more literate and more committed student body and funding that could again embrace new ideas and new technologies for more of them.